

The Investigation of Political Assassination by the U.S. House of Representatives

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A Congressional Committee to Investigate

On September 14, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to establish a twelve-member select committee to investigate the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and "any others the select committee shall determine." Chairman of the committee is Rep. Thomas Downing of Virginia (who is not running for reelection), and if the committee is extended into the new Congress which begins in January, he will be succeeded by Rep. Henry Gonzalez of Texas.

Membership, Funding, Staff

Other members of the committee are Democrats Yvonne Burke (Cal.), Walter Fauntroy (D.C.), Harold Ford (Tenn.), Louis Stokes (Ohio), and Christopher Dodd (Conn.), and Republicans Richardson Preyer (N.C.), Stewart McKinney (Conn.), Burt Talcut (Cal.), Samuel Devine (Ohio), and Charles Thone (Neb.). As of press time, the committee counsel, a vital position in determining the direction and intensity of the investigations, had not been named.

The committee was given \$150,000 funding by the House Appropriations Committee, some \$57,000 less than requested. The committee will be staffed primarily by people with police and newspaper investigative experience. There is no indication that the committee will work with those who have independently researched these cases over the years, though both Gonzalez and Downing have maintained good contact over the past year with researchers such as Richard Sprague, Robert Morrow, Robert Groden, Mark Lane, and A. J. Weberman.

Press Coverage

As might be expected, the committee has received scant attention from the press. The New York Times merely noted its establishment in the context of a general article on recent activities in Congress. CBS, no friend to the issue, also mentioned it in passing.

The Forces Leading to the Committee

According to some accounts, the bill, House Resolution 1540, was passed as a result of a push from the Black Caucus, which had been spurred by a recent speech of Coretta King in which she called for a new investigation on the basis of new evidence. Mrs. King was referring to the suspicious removal of a black police detective from his beat near the Memphis Lorraine Motel just prior to the assassination. This incident was revealed by "Newsday" reporter Les Payne in February 1976. It was the subject of a recent article by Mark Lane in Washington's

"Newsworks." The Black Caucus apparently allied themselves with the supporters of the Downing and Gonzalez resolutions and thus achieved passage in the House by a wide margin.

There may, however, be other explanations for this rather unprecedented boldness on the part of Congress. This year is, of course, an election year. The Democrats are aware that high profile criticism of the Warren Commission, such as is likely to result from Congressional hearings on the JFK case, can only hurt ex-Commission member Gerald Ford. The "Castro-did-it" theory, apparently revived by the Schweiker Report, may have been instrumental in winning over conservative members of Congress; conversely, the possibility of exonerating Castro in a new probe may have inspired liberals intent on rapprochement with Cuba. At any rate, it seems more than likely that the new investigation is an outgrowth of bitter backroom wheeling and dealing rather than a sudden sensitivity to the evidence.

For the next several months an investigation, funded by Congress and armed with subpoena power, will be conducted, at least into the Kennedy and King cases. Occasional public hearings will be held. But the bulk of the select committee's work is to be secret. The investigation is at last begun, but its workings may be closed to the public.

Pressure by Citizens

These assassination cases have been covered up since the days the shots were fired. It would be naive to think a Congressional committee alone can put an end to the cover-ups. The investigation has only proceeded thus far due to great effort and concern of independent citizens; the investigation cannot succeed without their determined vigilance and their support and prodding of the Select Committee. □

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The closing date for considering material for publication in "People and the PURSUIT of Truth" is the 26th of the month preceding issue. If anybody wishes to submit a manuscript for a particular issue, the 26th of the month should be kept in mind.

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